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SUBJECT: TURKEY: ERDOGAN CRITICIZES TURKEY'S "FASCIST
APPROACH" TO MINORITIES

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: PM Erdogan told a crowd of AKP supporters on May 23 that Turkey had exhibited a "fascist approach" in the past when it had "shown the door to different ethnic identities." The remarks drew immediate and widespread attention in the Turkish press as well as the ire of opposition parties. Erdogan's forward-leaning yet vague remarks left it to listeners to fill in the blanks and made it difficult for critics to pin him down. Although the unprecedented criticism of past GOT policies by a Turkish prime minister provided some hope to Turkish liberals, it is unlikely Erdogan will risk alienating Turkey's largely nationalistic electorate by taking significant concrete steps to resolve Turkey's outstanding minority issues prior to national elections in 2011. End summary.

¶2. (U) Speaking at AKP's Duzce Provincial Convention on May 23, PM Erdogan responded to allegations that the GOT planned to illegally award a contract to demine the Turkish-Syrian border to an Israeli firm, by noting that there was no reason to see the "investments of global capital" as an omen that different religions or ethnicities would take control of Turkey. Erdogan said that Turkey had gained nothing when it had "shown the door to different ethnic identities" in the past. He stressed that such past actions had been part of a "fascist approach" and declared that "when we think about it with common sense we see that indeed we made mistakes."

¶3. (U) "Hurriyet" deemed Erdogan's words "historic self-criticism." "Haberturk" wrote that the statement would trigger heated controversy. Many press outlets inferred that Erdogan had been referring to the incidents of September 6 and 7, 1955, when crowds pillaged Greek shops and houses in Istanbul in response to false reports that the house where Turkey's founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk had lived as a child in Thessaloniki, Greece was burned down. The riots forced many Greeks to flee Turkey. Yet, "Hurriyet's" Oktay Eksi and others pointed out that the PM's vague remarks could have referred to: the population exchange of 1923; the "disaster" of 1955; or the Greek citizens who were forced to emigrate to Greece in 1964-65 in response to Greek operations in Cyprus. "Hurriyet's" Yusuf Kanli saluted Erdogan's remarks as a "late but welcome awareness of what we indeed have lost by losing those elements of our society." But Kanli questioned Erdogan's sincerity by recalling his frequent "xenophobic" remarks, including Erdogan's "love it or leave it" remark to Kurds, and warning to the Armenian government that Turkey could send back all the estimated 40,000 "illegal Armenians" living in Turkey.

¶4. (U) Opposition parties denounced Erdogan. Main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) Chairman Deniz Baykal said Erdogan was trying to be sympathetic to foreigners at the expense of Turkey. "What does he want to achieve by accusing Turkey? Opposition Nationalist Action Party (MHP) Chairman Devlet Bahçeli claimed that Erdogan was exhibiting the same mindset of "collaborators" who signed the Sevres Treaty. He called Erdogan's remarks "a lie" that constituted "a black page" in Erdogan's political record. "If he wants to rake up the past, he should start with those of neighboring countries and imperialistic powers." Bahçeli demanded Erdogan apologize to the Turkish people.

¶5. (C) Comment: The unprecedented criticism by a prime minister of Turkey's past treatment of minorities is an important step toward Turkey's coming to terms with its past. By not pointing to a specific incident, Erdogan skillfully allowed others to fill in the blanks while making it difficult for opponents to offer specific criticisms. There is no doubt that Erdogan's statement was driven in part by keen political instincts, as he tried to reach out to liberal segments of the electorate who currently have nowhere else to turn. He may also have been testing the waters for a possible move on any one of a number of minority issues, such as re-opening Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary, granting official recognition to Alevi cem houses, or continuing to take some steps to address long-standing complaints of Turkey's ethnic Kurdish minority. But given AKP's poor performance in March local elections, the recent slump in the polls, and European rhetoric in opposition to Turkey's full

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EU membership, Erdogan is likely to avoid alienating Turkey's largely nationalistic electorate by taking significant steps on these issues in the near future.

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